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AUTHOR	Spradley, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

While the numbers of traditional age African American males enrolling in and graduating from higher education are declining, adult black males are increasingly returning to college. According to 2001 U.S. Census figures, the number of black males aged 25 years and over enrolled in college has increased from 143,000 in 1990 to 267,000 in 1995, to 335,000 in 2000. The adult black male's increased participation in higher education over the last decade has challenged postsecondary institutions to address the special needs of the adult learner. There are several interventions to help increase the success of adult African American males in higher education. Peer interactions provide needed social integration into the academic experience. Facilitative learning environments with faculty who nurture accumulated learning, contribute to knowledge acquisition, and encourage the application of learning to improve social surroundings are also critical to success. Being aware of the distinctive extra-curricular experiences that enrich learning and provide application opportunities is also important for faculty. Providing insightful information to educators on best practices in adult learning, including the obstacles adults encounter on numerous levels--interpersonal, personal, and organizational--is also a key step toward inclusive educational transformation. (Contains 15 references.) (CS)

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Strategies for Educating the Adult Black Male in College

by Patricia Spradley

INTRODUCTION

Administrators, scholars, faculty, and students continue to actively discuss the socioeconomic and educational plight of African American males and their declining enrollment and retention in and graduation from higher education. The majority of research has focused on traditional-age students and increasing their success. For example, evidence suggests that the decision of traditional-age African American males to drop out of college may be caused by several factors, including lack of financial aid, socio-cultural challenges, and institutional incompatibility (Wilson, 1996). Initial recommendations to address the plight of traditional-age African American male college students include increased attention to mentoring, as mentors have the potential of assisting African American males in negotiating the enormous intricacies of the higher education pipeline (Wilson, 2000).

One promising trend is the returning of adult males. The number of black males 25 years old and over enrolled in college has increased from 143,000 in 1990 to 267,000 in 1995 to 335,000 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The adult black male's increased participation in higher education over the last decade has challenged post-secondary institutions to adapt to changing clientele and design their programs to address the special needs of the adult learner (NCES, 1996; Perna, 1997). For instance, it has become necessary to provide accessible options for academic pursuit that respond to the adult males' expectations, needs, and interests. There are three main strategies that help to support this population: 1) peer support in classes as an incentive for their learning; 2) faculty-student relationships; and 3) extra-curricular activities (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This ERIC Digest will review these three key strategies, providing administrators with needed information to guide the design of programs and activities to help support this population.

PEER INTERACTIONS

According to the work of researchers Merriam and Caffarella (1991), the social environment of the classroom is a major element in the productive development of adults involved in formal education. Because adults spend less time on college campuses, peer support in the classroom is a focal point for both social integration and study group interests. A study conducted by Spradley (1996) with adult African American male graduates from an urban commuter baccalaureate institution revealed the importance of peer support on campus through study groups and classroom interactions as a means of facilitating academic success. The adult black males' study group involvement included working together, sharing notes, discussing study techniques, and arriving at a collective solution to the problems they faced. Study groups were forums for peer socialization that provided supportive friendships, positive social interactions, and friendly intellectual competition with fellow students. Adult African American male involvement in study groups provided them with the unique opportunity to talk with other students with similar seriousness about their studies. Consequently, discourse as an aspect of social and emotional peer support has been documented (Quinnan, 1997) as a way of enhancing learning through discussion, exploration and positive interactions with others.

FACULTY-STUDENT RELATIONS

Faculty members play the role of mediating the ways in which people approach their learning. That is, the instructor is usually responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning that takes place (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). In order to reverse the downward enrollment and graduation trends of the black male in the academy, faculty members are challenged to accommodate the concerns of adult black males.

There is a need for adult African American males to believe that faculty are evaluating them fairly, are working on their behalf, and are considerate of their role as student, parent, and employee (Vella, 1994). As is the case with most adult learners, when older black male learners are clear about their role in the college classroom, the tasks involved in fulfilling that role, and the functional boundaries, they can move forward with their learning (Kasworm, 1997). Well-designed learning tasks that encourage open dialogue are important for adult learning to occur. A complete and mutual understanding on the part of each participant in the dialogue is necessary so that the right of the other to be an equal partner in the discussion authenticates the teacher-student interaction (Vella, 1994). Discussions that expand their understanding of the content and assist them in placing information within a relevant context in their own lives increases the adult males' self-motivation for the application of new learning.

Adults often enroll in college to address work or life transitions and faculty members are valued as facilitators of learning with professional expertise and possible connections to the world of work (Vella, 1994). Student-teacher relationship strains occur when the former balances are neglected and faculty members ask intimidating questions and provide critical evaluation of the black males' experiences and learning. Under such intense circumstances, it is possible that faculty members will be viewed as instigators of failure rather than facilitators of learning, especially if faculty seem uncomfortable and avoid the adult learner outside of class. A balance between the teacher-student learning relationship and role clarification is a constant one that requires disciplined thoughtfulness and includes the adult learners' cache of personal knowledge and experiences that complements and enriches subject matter presented in class discussions (Kasworm, 1997).

Faculty members who are accessible, concerned with students, and are committed to quality instruction in the classroom environment play a significant role in the students' learning and persistence (Spradley, 1996). Students' relationship with faculty and other students as well as class-

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related learning are powerful influences on their college experiences and intentions to remain in the institution.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Administrators at colleges where a critical mass of African American males are enrolled express concern about the decisions of young black males to be inactive in campus life (Turner, 2000). It is hypothesized that young black males do not see the value or the importance of participating in extra-curricular activities. However, high school records reveal many of these young black males to have been actively involved in extra-curricular activities while in secondary school. Some were even admitted to higher education institutions because of their active involvement in extra-curricular activities (Turner, 2000). Perhaps the disconnect in extra-curricular involvement on campus is mediated by the students' feelings of academic ineptitude and their lack of critical appreciation of university life as being instrumental to socio-cultural development, as well as professional satisfaction (Vella, 1994). Some of the most recent data indicate that the most successful traditional-age black male students tend to have a balance between the academic and social environments of college life, and are skillful at negotiating the educational pipeline (Hrabowski, et. al. 1998).

But for adults, the types of extra-curricular activities tend to be different from traditional age students. For the adult learner, involvement in campus life offers another type of challenge. As an example, involvement in campus life implies juggling such competing challenges as parenting and maintaining a full-time work schedule, in addition to the equally time- and energy-consuming academic schedule (Vella, 1994). This makes participation in extra-curricular activities on campus difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, many adult learners are engaged as citizens and leaders in their communities.

The context in which adults participate with others to frame and develop communities represents the application of learning through experience. Kasworm (1997) labeled the learning as life-world knowledge structures. These out-of-class contexts for learning act as alternative avenues for conventional campus involvement (i.e., social clubs, campus activities, etc.) in extra-curricular activities. Spradley's (1996) research efforts on adult African American male persistence offered evidence on the importance of students' involvement in extra-curricular activities and the nature of their interactions with the community. According to study participants, relationships developed with community-based organizations advanced their understanding of the connection between off-campus extra-curricular activities that positively influenced their lives and application of learning to community life. For example, some males were volunteer mentors for the Boys Club, tutors at the YMCA, and organizers of church- affiliated Male Rites of Passage programs. This socially responsible spirit of altruism is not unusual. Still others noted substantial improvement in grades as a result of application of learning to community involvement. According to Cobb (1995), the give back to my community thinking is critical to accounting for learning as it occurs in a social and cultural context by bringing one perspective or the other to the fore as the need arises.

SUMMARY

While there are no quick solutions to the dilemma of the declining academic achievement of black males, there is hope for etching consciousness into the minds of academy members for effectively educating adult learners, among them African American males. Several interventions can help to increase adult African American male success. Peer interactions provide needed social integration into the academic experience. Facilitative learning environments with faculty who nurture accumulated learning, contribute to knowledge acquisition, and encourage the application of learning to improve social surroundings are also critical to success. Being aware of the distinctive extra-curricular experiences that enrich learning and provide application opportunities is important for faculty. Lastly, providing insightful information to educators on best practices in adult learning, including the obstacles adults encounter on numerous levels (i.e., interpersonal, personal, organizational) is a key step toward inclusive educational transformation.

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